

## **DETERMINING RETENTION PERIODS**

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Keeping records, either in offices or storage areas, costs large sums of money. The actual or potential value of the records should be weighed against the storage costs. There have been instances when an organization became so enthusiastic about the possibility of freeing office space by clearing out its old records that it went too far and discarded material too soon. But usually this is not the problem. Most of us tend to be overly cautious and to exaggerate the frequency of our reference to material when considering establishment of retention periods.

The questions we must ask ourselves are:

- How serious would it be if we were unable to put our hands on a particular record 5 or 10 years from now?
- What are the chances of it being needed?
- Are the consequences serious enough to justify our keeping thousands of cubic feet of records for a long period of time at considerable cost?
- Is the information available anywhere else?
- Would the cost to reconstruct the record justify storage fees?

By asking these types of questions, we can begin to take a more realistic approach to determining how long records should be kept.

Setting retention periods involves negotiation with those persons who use the records. Establishing a realistic need for the records is a must. The answer that the records are used all of the time and therefore, must be kept permanently, is not sufficient. The willingness to compromise on a retention period in order to meet everyone's needs is necessary. Another tool in determining retention periods is to review the General Records Schedules in Appendix I, SAM-Records Management of the Records Management Desk Reference. These schedules contain recommended retention periods for certain records common to most agencies.

When retention periods have been established for all records, a schedule can be developed to formalize the decisions on retention periods and provide the basis for a continuing program of records management.

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